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ABSTRACT

Researchers have not yet been able to determine the effect of divorce on children's level of anxiety. Many studies suggest that divorce and remarriage can cause a great deal of anxiety in children. A study was conducted to determine if elementary, middle, and high school students differ in levels of state anxiety (level of anxiety at a particular point in time) and trait anxiety (overall level of anxiety) dependent on the family structure in which they live (intact, single parent, or blended). The State-Trait Anxiety Inventory for Children was administered to 909 children in grades 2 through 12 and their anxiety levels were examined. Analysis of variance techniques with appropriate follow-up procedures were used to assess differences in state and trait anxiety levels in children living in the three different family structures. No significant differences were found dependent on family type. (Four pages of references and 11 data tables are included.) (Author/NB)

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Anxiety Levels of Children Living in Intact, Single Parent, and Blended Families

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Abstract

Researchers have not yet been able to determine the effect of divorce on children's level of anxiety. Many studies suggest that divorce and remarriage can cause a great deal of anxiety in children. The purpose of this study was to determine if elementary, middle, and high school children differ in levels of state (level of anxiety at a particular point in time) and trait anxiety (overall level of anxiety) dependent on the family structure in which they live--intact, single parent, or blended.

Anxiety levels of 909 children in grades 2 through 12 were examined. Analysis of variance techniques with appropriate follow-up procedures were used to assess differences in state and trait anxiety levels in children living in the three different family structures. No significant differences were found dependent on family type. Variables for study in future research are suggested.

Anxiety Levels of Children Living in Intact, Single Parent, and Blended Families

Divorce and remarriage are major causes of anxiety in children. This change in family structure is affecting an increasing number of children as it has been estimated that by 1990, one out of every three children under the age of 18 will experience their parents divorce (Cantrell, 1986; Kurdek, 1981). Since many of the divorced individuals eventually remarry, three predominant family structures have emerged--intact families (children living with both natural parents), single parent families (children living with only one of the natural parents), and blended families (children living with one natural parent and one stepparent) (Clayton, Horns, & Brown, 1986).

Justification

Researchers have not yet been able to determine the effect of divorce or remarriage on children (Kephart, 1977). However, studies show that the change in family structure resulting from divorce and/or remarriage of parents can create mild or temporary behavior problems for some children and lasting emotional and behavioral difficulties for others (Wolchek, Fogas, & Sandler, 1984). Adjustment to divorce and to being a member of a blended family can create a great deal of change and stress resulting in increased anxiety levels in children (Skeen, Robinson, & Flake-Hobson, 1985; Cantrell, 1986; Nelson, 1982; Basch & Kersch, 1986). The consequences of high levels of anxiety or stress are usually negative.

In the development of a life event scale to measure stress in children, Coddington (1984) found that divorce of parents was the third highest stressful event in the life of the child. Only death of a parent and death of a sibling were weighted more stressful than divorce. Additionally, Basch and Kersch (1986) report that divorce is a highly stressful life event for adolescents.

Few studies have measured anxiety levels of children living in different types of family structures. The validity and reliability of many of the studies that have been conducted has been questioned (Ganong & Coleman, 1984; Guidubaldi, Perry, Cleminshaw, & Mcloughlin, 1983). Ganong and Coleman (1984) state "the body of research is small, plagued with inconsistencies and methodological problems" (p. 402). For example, parental and teacher opinion have been used to measure anxiety in children. It has been determined that these perceptions of a child's divorce adjustment do not necessarily reflect the child's true feelings (Kurdek, 1981).

Statement of Problem

The purpose of this study was to examine differences in children's anxiety levels related to family structure (intact, single-parent, and blended). Differences in anxiety levels related to gender and school level (elementary, middle, and high school) dependent on type of family structure were, also, addressed. Thus, the following hypotheses were tested:

1) There will be no significant differences in

anxiety levels of children related to the three types of family structure.

2) There will be no significant differences in anxiety levels of children related to gender dependent on type of family structure.

3) There will be no significant differences in anxiety levels of children related to school level dependent on type of family structure.

Review of Related Research

In a review of the related research, Ganong and Coleman (1981) found three studies--Burchinal, 1964; Santrock, Warshak, Lindbergh, and Meadows, 1982; and Santrock, Warshak and Elliott, 1982--which examined anxiety levels of children living in different types of family structures. No differences in anxiety levels by family structure were reported.

In a study of 566 children, the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory was used to assess anxiety levels of children living in different family structures (Nunn, Parish, & Worthing, 1983). Significant differences were found on both anxiety scales for children living in the different family types. Children living in intact families were less anxious than children living in single parent or blended families.

Divorce

Divorce can be stressful to a child for many reasons. Divorce threatens an important basic need of children--their security (Despert, 1962). Often an initial reaction of the young

child is that of desertion or abandonment by the parent who leaves (Simon, 1964; Blaine, 1969; Despert, 1962; Skeen & McKenry, 1985). Researchers report that children often experience feelings of anger, fear, guilt, and loneliness as a result of their parents' divorce (Long, 1979; Cantrell, 1986; Skeen, 1984). Another reason divorce is stressful is that the child is often caught in the conflict that exists between the separating parents (Simon, 1984; Despert, 1962; Blaine, 1969; Wallerstein, 1985).

Wallerstein and Kelly (cited in Wolchek et al., 1984) reported sex differences in adjustment to divorce. They found that nearly all differences between girls from intact and divorced families disappeared two years after divorce, but boys of divorced parents continued to feel more anxious than boys from intact families. Eighteen months after parental separation, boys showed more depression, felt more rejected by their fathers, and felt more stressed within the family than girls.

Several researchers (Skeen, 1984; Joliff, 1984; Simon, 1964; Hodges, Tiernery, & Buchsbaum, 1984) suggest that it is not the divorce that causes the problems for children but more the disruption in parenting and accustomed life style that comes as a result of the divorce. Hodges et al. (1984) found that families of divorce move significantly more often, have lower incomes, and see their income as less adequate than intact families.

Remarriage

Children often experience an additional adjustment period when and if their parents decide to marry again. Skeen et al. (1985) report that when a child becomes a member of a blended family, typical reactions include anger, guilt, jealousy, testing, confusion, comparison with the natural parent, and rejection. They report that these reactions can be overcome with time and understanding. Other studies confirm that children of remarriage may have a considerable adjustment change, but that there are no major long-range developmental effects (Joliff, 1984). According to Ganong and Coleman (1984), remarriage of parents does not appear to relate to problem behavior.

In a study of stress on children, Longfellow and Belle (1984) reported that adjustment problems were associated with the presence of a stepfather in the house. They suggested that the presence of a stepfather may have caused stress for the child because of conflicting loyalties between "new" fathers and "old" fathers or because of the adjustment to a new parental figure. Some researchers reported that the relationship between the stepmother and stepchildren was more strained than that between stepfather and stepchildren (Duberman, 1975).

Joliff (1984) postulated that adjustment to remarriage was easier for boys than for girls. However, Duberman (1975) found that the sex of the stepchild was not a factor in the relationship between stepchildren and stepparents.

Joliff (1984) reported that adjustment to remarriage was easier for young children than for adolescents. The effect of remarriage was less strained for children under the age of eight, somewhat more difficult for children between eight and twelve and the most difficult for adolescents.

Summary

There is research that supports the view that an unhappy, intact family situation has a more harmful effect on children than a broken home (Kephart, 1977; Skeen, 1984). For example, Obe: (1969) feels that a child's adjustment is affected more by the emotional situation at home than by the divorce and/or remarriage. According to Despert (1962) as long as the child receives adequate emotional support no severe long-range problems will result.

There is, also, evidence to support the view that the creation of a blended family can resolve some of the problems caused by divorce. The new family structure provides two parental role models, parental task sharing, an improved financial situation, and an improved social support system. These factors help to generate stability within the family (Nunn et al., 1983).

Methodology

Sample

The sample for the study was comprised of 909 students in grades 2 through 12. Of the sample 413 were elementary students (grades 2 through 5), 221 were middle school students (grades 6

through 8), and 275 were high school students (grades 9 through 12). Of the students 476 were girls and 414 were boys. Nineteen students did not indicate their gender. Of the sample 575 children lived in intact families, 213 lived in single parent families, and 110 lived in blended families. Twelve children indicated a family structure other than the three being studied. For the purposes of this study, a child who lived with either his/her mother or father was classified as living in a single parent family. In addition, a child was described as living in a blended family whether he/she lived with a stepfather or a stepmother.

Students were drawn from a school system located in a suburb of a large metropolitan city in Alabama. The socio-economic status of the sample can be classified as middle to high as determined by the small number of students who received free lunches.

Definition of Terms

For the purposes of this study, anxiety was defined as a complex emotional reaction to a situation perceived as personally threatening (Spielberger, 1972). This study focused on two forms of anxiety--state and trait anxiety. State anxiety was defined as how an individual feels "at the present" moment while trait anxiety was defined as how an individual feels "in general" (Spielberger, Edwards, Montuori, & Lushene, 1973). The two types of anxiety were measured by the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory for Children.

Procedure

Parental permission was obtained for each child participating in the study. The children were administered the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory for Children (STAIC). In addition, each student completed a researcher-developed demographic data sheet. The STAIC was administered to groups of 20 students at each of three elementary, one middle, and one high school in the school district. The total length of time for testing for each subject was 20 minutes.

Instrumentation

The STAIC was developed by C. D. Spielberger, C. D. Edwards, J. Montuori, and R. Lushene in 1970. The instrument consists of two separate one-page self-report scales. The form to measure state anxiety, STAIC Form C-2 (see Appendix A), consists of 20 items, each beginning with the phrase "I feel." The child places a checkmark beside the ending word or phrase that best describes how he/she feels at that particular moment. The form to measure trait anxiety, STAIC Form C-2 (see Appendix B), consists of 20 statements which describe how children feel in general. The child is to indicate if he/she feels this way hardly ever, sometimes, or often. Both scales are scored in the same manner. Items are assigned values of 1, 2, or 3 with one indicating the absence of anxiety and 3 indicating the presence of anxiety. The values are summed to determine the child's score. Procedures are outlined in the test manual for calculating scores when three or

more items are omitted. Scores range from 20 to 60. Higher scores indicate higher levels of anxiety.

Reliability information for the STAIC was based on a sample of elementary school children in Florida. Cronbach's alpha was computed to determine internal consistency of the instrument. The alpha for the state anxiety scale was .82 for males and .87 for females. The alpha for the trait anxiety scale was .78 for males and .81 for females (Spielberger et al., 1973).

Concurrent validity of the trait anxiety scale was established by its correlation with two widely used measures of trait anxiety in children with a sample of 75 children--the Children's Manifest Anxiety scale ($r = .75$) and the general anxiety scale for children ($r = .63$). Construct validity for the state anxiety scale was based on a sample of more than 900 fourth, fifth, and sixth grade students. Detailed data is presented in the STAIC Preliminary Manual (Spielberger et al., 1973). Thus, the STAIC appears to be a valid and reliable instrument for assessing levels of anxiety in children and was considered appropriate for use in this study.

Results

In examining the descriptive statistics of the study, it was found that trait anxiety levels were higher than state anxiety levels for children in all three family types. In addition, children living in intact families had lower state and trait anxiety levels than children living in other family structures. (See Table 1.)

Insert Table 1 about here

The data were analyzed using analysis of variance procedures to assess differences in state and trait anxiety levels of children living in the three types of family structures. Differences in state anxiety levels between children living in intact families and children living in blended families were statistically significant ($F = 4.64$, $df = 2,872$, $p < .01$) but were not substantively meaningful (eta square = .01). (See Table 2.) No differences in trait anxiety levels existed between children living in the different family structures. (See Table 3.)

Insert Table 2 about here

Insert Table 3 about here

When state anxiety levels were examined with respect to family structure and gender, it was found that males living in intact families had lower state anxiety levels than males living in other types of family structures and than females living in all three types of family structures. Males in blended families had the highest levels of state anxiety (Table 4). No significant interaction in state anxiety was found between the

type of family structure in which the child lived and the child's gender (Table 5).

Insert Table 4 about here

Insert Table 5 about here

When trait anxiety was examined by family structure and gender, it was determined that males had lower trait anxiety scores than females in all types of family structures. Females living in blended families had the highest levels of trait anxiety. (See Table 6.) There was no significant interaction for levels of trait anxiety between type of family structure and gender. However, when the main effects were examined, a statistically significant difference by child's gender was obtained ($F = 37.47$, $df = 1,859$, $p < .001$). (See Table 7.) Although, males had significantly lower trait anxiety scores than females, this difference was not substantively meaningful (eta square = .04) and was not dependent on family type.

Insert Table 6 about here

Insert Table 7 about here

When examining state anxiety by type of family structure and school level, it was found that elementary school children living in intact families had the lowest level of state anxiety and high school students living in blended families had the highest state anxiety level (Table 8). No significant interaction existed between the type of family structure and school level for state anxiety. An examination of the main effects showed a statistically significant difference by school level (F = 15.418, df = 2,874, $p < .001$), but this difference was not substantively meaningful (eta square = .03) and was not dependent on family type. (See Table 9.)

Insert Table 8 about here

Insert Table 9 about here

When assessing trait anxiety by family structure and school level, it was found that elementary school children in intact families had the lowest trait anxiety levels, and high school students living in single parent families had the highest trait anxiety levels. (See Table 10.) No significant interaction in trait anxiety scores was found among the different school levels and types of family structures. When examining the main effects, a significant difference was found by school level (F = 7.282, df = 2,878, $p < .01$). Again, this difference was not substantively

meaningful (eta square = .02) nor was it dependent on family type. (See Table 11.)

Insert Table 10 about here

Insert Table 11 about here

Discussion

State and trait anxiety levels for 909 children enrolled in the second through the twelfth grade were examined with respect to the type of family in which the children lived. Results indicated that the children did not differ in their levels of anxiety. Although state anxiety levels significantly differed by type of family structure, this difference was not substantively meaningful.

Although differences in anxiety levels were not apparent in this study, divorce and remarriage are stressful events in the life of a child. It could be that other factors should be considered which may be alleviating some of the stresses for these children. For example, the majority of the children in this study were classified as living in the middle to upper-middle socio-economic range. These children would probably not experience the same stresses as children living in lower income familes who are often faced with a reduced standard of living as a result of a divorce (Clayton et al., 1986). Thus,

these findings should only be generalized to children in the middle socio-economic range.

Since divorce and remarriage are becoming more common, children may feel freer to discuss their fears and feelings with family and friends. As Kurdek (1981) indicates, the availability of social supports after divorce affect the level of anxiety in children of divorce and remarriage.

It could be, too, that the differences reported in the existing research are the result of poorly controlled studies (Nelson, 1982) and should not be generalized to all children. Socio-economic status, type of loss (death or divorce), sex of lost parent, age and sex of children, and length of time since divorce may be related to the social and emotional adjustment of family members. These variables could affect study results and should be adequately controlled. Copeland (1985) identifies two additional areas to consider as predictors of children's stress following parental divorce. These predictors are the role of the mother's work situation (including the amount of time spent at work, the level of the job, and level of job satisfaction) and the continued parental conflict after the divorce.

This study is limited in that a differentiation was not made as to whether single parent and blended families were formed as a result of the death of a parent or by divorce. There is research that supports the view that children react differently depending on the type of loss experienced (Nelson, 1982).

Another limitation of the study is that the level of conflict within the family unit was not assessed. Divorce and remarriage can actually lessen the level of conflict in the child's family environment and, consequently, reduce the level of stress. Burchinal (cited in Slater & Haber, 1984) reports that children living in single-parent homes with little conflict are better adjusted than children living in intact families with a great deal of conflict. Additionally, Slater and Haber (1984) conclude that the adjustment of teenagers was related to the level of conflict in the home and not to the effect of divorce. Thus, the level of conflict may be an important factor to consider in future research.

It is, also, possible that the STAIC is not sensitive enough to effectively examine the differences which are present. Since the STAIC is a self-report inventory, children may have responded in ways that would be considered socially desirable. Therefore, although the STAIC has substantial evidence of reliability and validity, it could be that this instrument does not pick up the subtle nuances which may exist for a complex issue such as anxiety levels.

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Table 1

Mean Scores for State and Trait Anxiety Levels by Type of Family Structure

	State anxiety			Trait anxiety		
Family structure	n	M	SD	n	M	SD
Intact	560	30.33	6.36	563	36.74	7.16
Single parent	207	31.56	7.08	209	37.76	7.32
Blended	108	32.02	6.57	107	37.44	6.75
Total	875	30.83	6.59	879	37.06	7.16

Table 2

Analysis of Variance Summary Table: State Anxiety by Type of Family Structure

Source	SS	df	MS	F
Between groups	399.4897	2	199.7449	4.64*
Within groups	37537.6211	872	43.0477	
Total	37937.1094	874		

* $p < .01$

Table 3

Analysis of Variance Summary Table: Trait Anxiety by Type of Family Structure

Source	SS	df	MS	F
Between groups	177.4055	2	88.7028	1.735
Within groups	44798.7148	876	51.1401	
Total	44976.1172	878		

Table 4

Mean Scores for State Anxiety Levels by Type of Family Structure and Child's Gender

	Gender					
	Male			Female		
Family structure	n	M	SD	n	M	SD
Intact	278	30.30	6.44	272	30.35	6.34
Single parent	79	31.41	6.83	122	31.75	7.40
Blended	41	32.56	6.05	65	31.95	6.81

Table 5

Mean Scores for Trait Anxiety Levels by Type of Family Structure and Child's Gender

	Gender					
	Male			Female		
Family structure	n	M	SD	n	M	SD
Intact	280	35.29	6.94	273	38.17	7.04
Single parent	81	36.33	6.24	121	38.88	7.90
Blended	41	35.17	5.85	64	39.19	6.64

Table 6

Analysis of Variance Summary Table: State Anxiety--Type of Family Structure and Gender

Source	SS	df	MS	F
Main effects	458.717	3	152.906	3.508*
Family	450.334	2	225.167	5.166**
Gender	.339	1	.339	.008
Family x gender	15.124	2	7.562	.173
Residual	37093.820	851	43.589	
Total	37567.664	856	43.887	

* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$

Table 7

Analysis of Variance Summary Table: Trait Anxiety--Type of Family Structure and Gender

Source	SS	df	MS	F
Main effects	2055.715	3	685.238	14.045*
Family	113.302	2	56.651	1.161
Gender	1828.082	1	1828.082	37.470*
Family x gender	36.827	2	18.413	.377
Residual	41665.320	854	48.788	
Total	43757.863	859	50.940	

* $p < .001$

Table 8

Mean Scores for State Anxiety Levels by Type of Family Structure and School Level

	Family structure		
School level	Intact	Single parent	Blended
Elementary			
M	29.02	30.10	30.71
SD	6.44	7.68	7.15
n	266	86	42
Middle			
M	31.57	32.68	32.21
SD	6.24	7.75	4.23
n	129	53	34
High			
M	31.47	32.49	33.53
SD	5.92	5.28	7.61
n	165	68	32

Table 9

Analysis of Variance Summary Table: State Anxiety--Type of Family Structure and School Level

Source	SS	df	MS	F
Main effects	1688.953	4	422.238	10.097*
Family	306.817	2	153.409	3.668**
School level	1289.526	2	644.763	15.418*
Family x school	33.081	4	8.270	.198
Residual	36214.668	866	41.818	
Total	37936.703	874	43.406	

* $p < .001$

** $p < .05$

Table 10

Mean Scores for Trait Anxiety Levels by Type of Family Structure and School Level

	Family structure		
School level	Intact	Single parent	Blended
Elementary			
M	35.64	36.74	37.63
SD	7.07	7.24	7.35
n	263	88	41
Middle			
M	37.42	37.79	36.35
SD	7.65	8.67	6.73
n	132	53	34
High			
M	37.91	39.06	38.34
SD	6.68	6.08	5.95
n	168	68	32

Table 11

Analysis of Variance Summary Table: Trait Anxiety--Type of Family Structure and School Level

Source	SS	df	MS	F
Main effects	912.455	4	228.114	4.519*
Family	147.031	2	73.516	1.456
School level	735.112	2	367.556	7.282*
Family x School	150.295	4	37.574	.744
Residual	43912.980	870	50.475	
Total	44975.730	878	51.225	

* $p < .01$